W.A. Mozart
Die Zauberflöte

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Introduction

'Dined at Prince Schwarzenberg's ... after dinner charming music by Mozart. *Die Zauberflöte.*' Thus wrote Karl, Count Zinzendorf, in his diary on 19 February 1793;[1] there is a similar entry just over a year later. This music-loving aristocrat and prominent state official, whose comments after attending an early performance of the opera we shall find in chapter 7, is here unconsciously pointing to the extraordinary popularity that the music of Mozart's last opera achieved within a year or two of its première.

Of this success Mozart of course knew nothing, though his recognition of the opera's increasing hold on the public of the Freihaustheater auf der Wieden during the final weeks of his life gave him much pleasure. Perhaps the clearest indication of an opera's popularity at that time was to be measured by its appearance in the form of arrangements and adaptations. Apart from the piano scores and transcriptions that began to appear within weeks of the first night, there are in the case of *Die Zauberflöte* sets of variations and pot-pourris by Beethoven and Gelinek (several sets), Spohr and Sor; numbers from the opera make a saucy appearance in Lanner's waltz opus 196, *Die Mozartisten*, of 1842. The benign shadow of the opera lies heavily upon much of German-language literature and music in the next two centuries. Music from it appeared in arrangements for wind octet, flute quintet and quartet, string quartets, trios, duos (even for two cellos), guitar, and as German dances. In Victorian England, imagined to be unreceptive to *The Magic Flute*, there is evidence that many of the airs and duets ('The manly heart', for instance, as 'Bei Männern' was known) were familiar and well-loved items in the family circle and concert room. In Vienna, where the opera remained almost permanently in the repertory, a further sign of its hold on the public is to be found in the vocal quodlibets or pot-pourris prominent in innumerable plays with music in the popular theatres: no opera is as often quoted, from the early years of the nineteenth century on to

the death of that tradition that coincided with the passing in 1862 of its greatest master, Johann Nestroy (himself a Court Opera débutant as a very young Sarastro forty years before).

Die Zauberflöte has always been a controversial work: greatly loved and very frequently performed, yet also the object of heated scholarly debate and critical comment. The ordinary opera-goer does not find it difficult to come to terms with, though this has not prevented a large number of persons from feeling the need to interpret and explain what is at root a simple fairy-tale opera with a strong admixture of comic and more profound elements.

Two nineteenth-century comments suggested the nature of the problems it was held to present:

> Here that which is eternal, valid for all times and all humanity (it is enough that I point to the dialogue of the *Spokesman* with *Tamino*!), is so irretrievably bound to the veritably trivial tendency of the play, intended by the poet simply to please a suburban Viennese public, that we need the intervention of an explanatory historical critique in order to be able to understand and endorse the whole work in its accidentally shaped uniqueness.

The second:

> And yonder musician [i.e. Mozart], who used the greatest power which (in the art he knew) the Father of spirits ever yet breathed into the clay of this world; – who used it, I say, to follow and fit with perfect sound the words of the 'Zauberflöte' and of 'Don Giovanni' – foolishest and most monstrous of conceivable human words and subjects of thought – for the future 'amusement' of his race! – No such spectacle of unconscious (and in that unconsciousness all the more fearful) moral degradation of the highest faculty to the lowest purpose can be found in history.

The first writer is Richard Wagner; the essay is 'Das Publikum in Zeit und Raum' of 1878.[2] And the second writer is John Ruskin, in the Fifth Letter, 'Entertainment', of *Time and Tide* (25 February 1867).[3]

Belittlement of Schikaneder's libretto, like the numerous posthumous attempts to rob him of its authorship, have continued in the twentieth century, if on the whole to a less marked extent. This disparagement has done nothing to inhibit the enthusiasm for the opera of the general public, for whom the niceties of authenticity are of small concern.

In writing this book I have tried to maintain a balance between the needs of the ordinary opera-lover and the reader with a more specialized interest in Mozart's last work for the stage. I have also striven to thread my way through the thickets of the unusually prolific

and luxuriant secondary literature, but above all to concentrate on the essentials, which must surely be to set out as directly as possible the ingredients, questioning traditional assumptions whilst as far as possible avoiding new speculation. This means that I have not attempted a detailed interpretation of the opera in Masonic terms, since the surviving evidence is incomplete, and to some extent contradictory.

The nine chapters (readers are advised against looking for any significance in the number of chapters or their sub-divisions) cover the most important sources for the opera, the intellectual background against which it was written, a synopsis, the genesis of the opera, essays on the libretto and the music, an outline history of the work in performance and reception, the interpretative and practical problems that face the director of a production, and brief consideration of some of the problems that recur in criticisms of the work.